The Fundamentals of Caring

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The Fundamentals of Caring

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Summary

Will receives an unexpected visitor when he falls sick.

Notes

The following lovely authors contributed to this story: ADarkDemise, AGlassRoseNeverFades, Kai_99, LeatherBatsu, Maddie, OmniOstler, Selvhound, and The_German_Grim_Reaper.

This fic was based on one of Ostler's terrific prompts: "Will gets sick and Hannibal steps in to take care of him (pre-established relationship)."

See the end of the work for more notes

Will feels like hell.

He'd been coughing on and off for the past few hours and sneezing every few minutes when he's not coughing his throat out.

He feels even worse when the doorbell rings, the dogs immediately barking and crowding the door at the sound of a few knocks a second later.

"Fuck off," he groans, though he forces himself out of bed when the knocks turn insistent.

Wrapping a blanket around his shoulders, Will shuffles his feet forward and hobbles toward the door, his coughing growing louder from the exertion. When he finally makes it to the door, he sighs before he opens it slightly.

"Will?"

His brows raise when he sees Hannibal on the other side, the man looking concerned at his condition. He's about to answer when another cough wracks through his body, and he holds up a hand to halt any further questions from Hannibal.

"Are you alright?" Hannibal asks when the bouts of coughing finally stopped.

"What do you think?" Will manages to croak out as he leans against the door. "Can I help you?"

Hannibal looks uncertain as he answers, "I came here to offer you a ride to the next crime scene as I was on the way, but it seems that you're not well."

Will sighs. "I told Jack I was sick."

"He was under the impression it was just a common flu."

I'll give him a common flu, Will thinks darkly. "Sorry to disappoint him, I guess."

Hannibal looks slightly amused at his biting tone, though his amusement is short-lived when Buster begins to circle his leg.

"Buster, *tsshh,* " Will hisses.

Hannibal steals a glance inside before his gaze returns to Will's unruly state and the dogs' general restlessness. "I will let Jack know that you are indisposed. Please get some rest, and I will be back in a few hours."

Before Will can think of a reply, Hannibal turns away and is already on his phone as he makes his way to his Bentley.

Exhausted, Will closes the door and goes back to bed.

It's presumably a few hours later when he feels something cold and wet being draped across his forehead. He grumbles, turning his head to try to get rid of it, but the feeling remains. He opens his eyes blearily.

He isn't really sure what to think when he sees Hannibal sitting in the chair beside his bed. He's quite sure Hannibal hadn't been there when he'd fallen asleep. "When did you get here?" he asks drowsily.

Hannibal looks over to him, his expression slackening in what almost looks like relief as he sees that Will is awake. "Only about ten minutes ago," he assures Will. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," Will says, which is true.

"You had quite a fever when I arrived. I hope you don't mind that I let myself in, but you weren't answering the door and I was concerned."

"No, it's… it's fine. Did I forget to lock the door?"

Hannibal looks completely unashamed as he answers in the negative. "Your spare key is not well hidden. I would recommend finding a better place for it in the future."

Will sighs, but he can't bring himself to be upset by Hannibal's transgression. He opens his mouth to speak, but before he can, a rough cough tears through his throat and his fist quickly comes up to cover his mouth. He can feel the force of the cough shake through his shoulders as he sits up. The cold, wet cloth on his forehead falls off, and he half-mindedly shifts so it falls into his lap.

As soon as the cough subsides, Hannibal presses a cup of water against his knuckles and tells him to drink it. Will takes the cup, carefully lifting it to sip. When he finishes with that, Hannibal takes the glass and sets it on the bedside table. Will moves to get up, but then Hannibal is pressing a hand on his shoulder.

"Lie back down, Will, you need to rest," Hannibal says. Will feels something indignant bubble up in him as Hannibal frowns and uses his other hand to pick up the wet towel from his blanket-covered lap. Will scowls, prepared to shoulder off Hannibal's hand, but before he can, Hannibal palms the towel against his forehead, and a surprised sigh escapes him at the soothing touch. Will quiets himself as Hannibal gently pushes him back down onto his back.

"Have you had lunch yet, Will? What was the last thing you ate?" Hannibal asks. Will's eyes fall closed as Hannibal positions the towel on his forehead.

"I didn't feel up to lunch, and I think I had some fries last night?" Will mutters. A small part of him at the back of his mind feels almost ashamed at the admittance. His eyebrows furrow as he tries to remember if he had anything else. "It was a lot of fries."

Will vaguely hears Hannibal sighing and the sound of a chair pushing back. Almost immediately, he feels slightly insecure.

“Though I can’t comment on the health benefits of the fries you’ve consumed, I can tell you that it is an inadequate substitute for actual food,” Hannibal says, looking disappointed.

His first instinct is to balk at the disappointment, panicking at the thought that he is the cause of it. The feeling is quickly replaced with disbelief laced with some disgust at his reaction — why should he care what Hannibal thinks about his dietary choices?

“Thanks for the lesson,” Will manages to bite out, though the sting of his words is lessened by his weakened state. “Guess you’ll be telling me to eat my greens next?”

Hannibal’s smile is indulgent when Will turns to look at him, and the sight of the man caring for him at his bedside tugs at something in him. Feeling uncomfortable, Will shuts his eyes again.

“I’m merely offering some advice, though I could cease on them if you’d prefer silence while I take care of you,” Hannibal replies.

The protest comes to his lips immediately. “I don’t need you to take care of me.”

A few seconds pass by in silence and Will doesn’t dare to open his eyes until Hannibal speaks again.

“You may not want me to,” Hannibal tells him, “but you certainly need someone. You’re in no state to be left on your own right now.”

Will can feel himself flushing as he opens his eyes and chances a glance at Hannibal. “I’m not a child,” he grumbles but doesn’t otherwise argue. If he’s being honest with himself, Hannibal is probably right. He’s not sure he has the energy to get out of bed right now, much less make himself something to eat.

“Will,” Hannibal says flatly. “If you were anyone else, I would be taking you to the hospital right now. If you don’t want me to be here, that’s fine, but I must insist you have someone here with you. I could call Beverly or Alana…?”

Will surprises himself with how quickly he says, “No.” Then he hastily tries to justify himself, not wanting to admit to Hannibal that he’d rather have him here than anyone else. “I mean, there’s no point bothering anybody else since you’re already here and all.”

He’s pretty sure Hannibal sees right through him because the skin around his eyes crinkles in a warm sort of amusement. “I’ll make you something to eat,” Hannibal says, and Will already knows there’s no point in arguing.

By the time Hannibal is done in the kitchen, Will is so exhausted that he is falling asleep sitting upright. The other man sets the tray with a bowl of broth atop a pillow in his lap.

"I must say, Will, the condition of your kitchen tests even my abilities as a chef."

Will tries not to feel embarrassed about the conditions of his house. He is due for grocery shopping but the latest case has kept him so busy that he couldn’t find the time.

"I'll go to the grocery store later."

"Nonsense. You're in no condition to go anywhere. I'd be surprised if you manage to walk to the bathroom without tripping. I'll bring the groceries. I was going to leave to get my things anyway."

Will bites back the snappy reply to the comment about him being invalid because that would just make him look like a dick and the older man doesn't deserve that. Hannibal didn't have to check on him earlier, nor did he have to come back and cook for him. But he did and not out of some sense of responsibility, but because he genuinely enjoys taking care of Will. It is clear with the way the older man is lurking nearby as Will slowly slurps the broth, making sure that he eats it all.

Will is not sure what to make of this. The idea of someone caring for him is absurd and completely alien. Will's father was never a person to coddle him when he got sick or hurt. Beau Graham was a practical and proud man who would rather die than ask for help from someone else. Pride was all Beau had, and he taught Will the same thing too; that Will needs to take care of himself, that he can't afford to be dependent on anyone else. But the man never actually taught Will how to do that.

And now, Will has a man in his house, eager to take care of him. Even going as far as staying at his house so that—

Wait a minute.

"Are - are you staying here?" he asks Hannibal in a high pitched voice.

Hannibal gives him a look that indicates his surprise at the reaction. "Is my presence here so objectionable to you?" he muses.

Will huffs, trying to hide his embarrassment. "I'm just—" Throwing a glance around the house, which looks like it's in a much worse condition than it usually is, he shrugs. "It's kind of a mess, is all."

Hannibal looks as if he sees through the lie, damn his perceptiveness, though he doesn't comment on it and gestures to the empty bowl instead. "May I?"

"Oh, sure," Will mutters, leaning back so Hannibal can pick up the tray before he makes his way into the kitchen.

The sounds of running water and the clinking of dishes were all that he hears for several moments, and Will wonders what sort of sight Hannibal makes as he roams about Will's kitchen like he owns the place. There's something unsettling at the thought of someone else in his space, but oddly enough, Will finds that he doesn't mind that it's Hannibal who's intruding in his domain.

It's only then that he notices that the house feels too silent, despite Hannibal’s presence. Frowning, Will looks around the fireplace and tries to look out the windows to locate his

dogs. With seven of them, the pack doesn’t usually stay silent for so long. His frown grows heavier when it looks like his pack might not be running around on the ground outside.

He immediately pounces on Hannibal when he emerges from the kitchen. "Where are my dogs?"

Hannibal doesn't seem surprised at the question. "Alana has them."

Will's eyebrows raise into the stratosphere at that. His coughs return for a few seconds and he winces as he clears his throat. Though he does feel marginally better, he's still not feeling his absolute best, to say the least. "Uh, why does Alana have them?"

"I thought it would be easier for you to recuperate without having to worry about them," Hannibal replies simply, settling into the chair next to Will's bed. "She will have them back later tomorrow morning."

It should tell him how sick he actually is that he didn't notice when Alana came to take his dogs. It is impossible to sleep through the racket they make when they hear a car drive down the dirt road.

He must have passed out. No wonder Hannibal is worried enough to stay with him for the night. Will is just glad that the older man is not insisting on taking him to a hospital.

He mumbles out thanks even though he is not pleased to be parted from his dogs. He knows that it is better if they stay with Alana for a few days, he’s in no condition to take care of them and he’s never going to compromise their health. He'll ask Alana when she comes in the evening.

Hannibal rises from the seat and puts a cool hand on his forehead. Will's eyes flutter and he sighs involuntarily.

"Hm, your fever is still quite high. You must rest, Will."

Will nods absentmindedly as he wiggles down the bed. Hannibal tucks him securely between the sheets and takes the wet towel to his forehead again. Instead of just putting the towel on his forehead and leaving, the man uses it lightly to wipe down his face to his throat and over his ears.

It actually feels pretty nice and calming. The older man's rhythmic movements lull him into a state between wakefulness and sleeping.

In his sleepy, contented state, Will doesn’t even realize he’s leaning into Hannibal’s touch until he hears the man make a surprised sound. No, he’s not just leaning into his touch— he’s practically nuzzling into the man’s hand. He would normally be embarrassed by this, but he’s hardly even awake right now and he can’t bring himself to care. It takes a moment, but Hannibal resumes his ministrations, and when he’s done wiping him off the rag is replaced by his hand. Will sighs contentedly, leaning into the gentle touch against his cheek.

“I don’t think you’re fully awake right now,” Hannibal says.

Will can hear the words as though they're coming from far away, but he can't quite work out their meaning. He moves to retract his hand and Will reaches up, making a faint, rather petulant grumbling noise as he blindly fumbles for Hannibal's wrist and does his best to hold it in place. There is a quiet, breathy laugh as Hannibal allows his arm to be guided back into place.

"I must admit, I wasn't expecting you to be this clingy. Are you like this towards everyone when you're sick, I wonder, or is it just me?"

There is a brief moment of silence after that — Will more asleep than not — before he feels the warmth of Hannibal's hand leave his cheek. This time, he lets it go, although he can feel himself frowning at the loss. He doesn't feel discontent for long, though, because then there is a soft press of lips to his forehead.

"Sweet dreams, darling boy," Hannibal murmurs, and Will finally drifts off into the realm of sleep.

His dreams are of sinking backward down through layers, deeper and deeper. Each layer darker and thicker than the last. Will can't say it's pleasant, it's like falling through an ocean of warm soup that grows hotter the further down he goes. Maybe this is like the bedrock at the bottom of the ocean as it's subducted under the molten mantle of the earth. It's like a weight at the center of his being is drawn inextricably towards something of greater mass than himself.

Finally, his body rolls over as he sinks so he can stare down into whatever this place is. In the farthest distance, there's a flicker and a flash. A single point of light twinkling like a star. Will's sinking towards it, and either it's growing bigger or he's sinking faster because it's growing rapidly in size. The flashing becomes a solid orb that radiates light. It grows until the darkness is almost entirely engulfed in blazing white light. So hot. Like the surface of the sun.

His skin has to be burning up and peeling off his charred bones in such radiation and yet as he looks towards his outstretched hand they appear healthy…

A dark line rips across the sphere of light, bisecting it, splitting it into two equal halves. The line parts and it's an eye. It's a great eye staring right at him.

Will bolts upright in his bed, gasping for breath. He's coated in sweat and immediately a wave of dizziness overwhelms him that sends him falling back against his pillows gracelessly.

"Will, good morning." Hannibal is right where he left him, a blanket wound about himself on the chair.

Will has never seen Hannibal with bed hair, and although the man hasn't actually slept in a bed, he's far from the usually well-put-together individual Will's used to seeing. His hair is

pushed up at the back from where he'd rested his head against the chair. He looks, dare Will consider this word to describe Hannibal Lecter, scruffy.

"You were dreaming, during which I believe your fever broke."

Will's eyes blink rapidly, the nightmare driving him into instant alertness as he looks around his space.

The sight of his house (clean and pristine again), his dogs (dozing in their dog beds - Alana must have brought them back at some point), and Hannibal by his side calms him down after several minutes. His breathing begins to return to normal, and when his fists unclench, he's not surprised to see deep impressions of his fingernails in the palms of his hands.

It's as he stares at his palms that Hannibal sidles closer to him on the sweat-soaked bed, uncaring for the mess as he takes Will's hands gently in his.

Will's eyes are still unseeing as they follow Hannibal's movements, the man's hands curled around his before they squeeze him tightly.

"Exhale when I let go," Hannibal's voice floats towards him. "And breathe in when I squeeze."

Will obeys, feeling the way his heartbeat settles from the staccato flutters to an even, steady beat after several minutes of the grounding exercise.

A calm silence settles around them then, Hannibal a warm presence beside him, their hands still interlaced together. Idly, Will wonders if Hannibal doesn't mind the sweat sticking to his palms. Judging by the way he's still sitting so close next to Will, perhaps not.

"Are you feeling better?"

Will nods, still too weary to speak.

"Very well. I will fetch you your breakfast if you'd like to use the bathroom first." A pause. "Do you require some assistance?"

Will flushes at the implication, and he shakes his head.

"Then I'll see you soon."

The warm feeling of Hannibal's hands in his lingers as he makes his way to the bathroom.

When he eventually makes it there, the world suddenly starts spinning and he has to brace himself on the sink, a white-knuckled grip as his head pounds. Chancing a glance at the mirror, he winces at his reflection. He looks like a horrible mess — it's no wonder Hannibal was hinting for a clean-up. Sighing, he comes to a stand when he's sure he's stable enough. The dizziness has abated somewhat, and he takes that as his cue to go through his ablutions and a quick shower as fast as he can before his body betrays him again.

Even with the haze in his mind, he can't help thinking about Hannibal and the way he has taken care of Will throughout the night. Does Hannibal intend to stay here until his fever is completely abated?

It should worry him when his stomach flutters at the thought.

When he emerges into his kitchen, feeling clean and more presentable at last, the smell of buttered toast and freshly brewed coffee fills his nose, and his mouth waters with the promise of a warm breakfast. Will studies Hannibal's profile quietly from where he is on the stairs until the man seems to realize his scrutiny.

"You look much better, Will. Have a seat."

The soft smile sends a small flutter through his belly, and he ignores the irrational annoyance at the coddling. He's so unused to someone caring for him in this manner that his first instinct is to make a biting comment.

For once, he bites his tongue.

He sighs in relief when he finally sits down at his dining table; there won't be any danger of falling again, at least. It feels good to be out of bed after a bout of sickness, even better when his breakfast and coffee are placed in front of him before Hannibal joins him at the table.

A soft touch to his forehead and he finds himself leaning into it. The touch is gone before he can feel self-conscious about it, and he avoids Hannibal's eyes when the man speaks.

"You're still warm," Hannibal says, sounding concerned. "I thought it was a case of seasonal flu or a mild fever, but you seem to have experienced a rather severe case of it. Would you be alright handling this alone?"

The words 'I'll be fine' sit ready on Will's tongue, but when he opens his mouth to say just that, he surprises even himself when he says instead, "I... I don't know."

Hannibal smiles reassuringly, leaning forward. "Then, if you'll allow me, I shall stay by your side for as long as you need me."

In his head, and to anyone who would dare to ask, Will blames his spiked heart rate on the fever. His tongue darts out to wet dry lips and he takes a sip of his coffee, keeping the mug held up in front of himself like a shield.

"What about your..." Will starts but has to pause to cough, "your patients?"

"I have already made the necessary calls to postpone all of my appointments and reschedule them for a later date, citing an unforeseeable family emergency."

Will tries not to squirm in his seat at Hannibal's words. He can't believe that he practically guilt-tripped Hannibal into staying with him, and the man actually agreed. He feels kind of bad now. He can't keep Hannibal here no matter how much he wants those big hands back on him.

Will coughs, feeling his face heat at his thoughts.

"You should rest, Will."

Will nods in agreement and lifts his arm towards Hannibal, waiting for the man to help him back to the bed. He wriggles around to get into a comfortable position where he can see the other man moving around his house.

Normally, he would bristle at the thought of another invading his home, but that's not the case with Hannibal. Will feels content hearing the other man shuffle around as if he has lived here for years and not mere hours. Even his dogs have gotten used to Hannibal's presence.

"They like you," he says absentmindedly.

It's not a big deal that his dogs like Hannibal. They like everyone. But it’s the way Hannibal treats them, with as much care and attention as Will himself would give them, that’s what makes him feel pleased.

"That they do, but between us, I'm bribing them."

"Is that so?"

He knows this already, he has seen Hannibal treating his dogs with homemade sausages. At this point, he’s sure that Hannibal is their most favorite human.

"Oh yes. You see, their father is a very stubborn man, impossible to please, so I had to find another way to impress him."

Will grins like an idiot and says, “It’s easy, you just give him another dog.”

He chuckles at the resulting expression on Hannibal’s face.

“Yet another dog would impress you?” Hannibal asks dryly.

Will shrugs. “I’m just saying, out of the two of us, I don’t think I’m the one who’s hard to please.”

“I suspect you’re using your dogs to avoid seeking actual human connections.” Hannibal’s face is nonchalant as he returns to Will’s side, settling on the edge of the bed.

“Me being sick doesn’t preclude me from kicking your ass out if you insist on psychoanalyzing me while I’m trapped in bed.”

“Are you really trapped, Will? Or do you only think you are?”

Will frowns at the question, knowing that Hannibal is talking of something else entirely. The conversation is steering into uncomfortable territory, at least for him. It doesn’t help that Hannibal’s intense gaze is fixed on him, flaying him open in that effortless way of his.

“What would please you?” Will bursts out before immediately wincing at his blubbering. As far as changing the subject goes, it’s not his smoothest move.

Hannibal’s smile is indulgent. “I would be pleased if you let me take care of you, at least until I’m satisfied that you are well.”

“What will it take to satisfy you?” The words slip out of him before the implication hits him. He refuses to acknowledge the blush spreading across his cheeks.

Hannibal’s smile grows wider. Slowly, he places his palm against Will’s forehead, though this time the touch lingers. As before, Will leans into it, chasing the warmth.

“At this moment? I want to see you healthy again, and I want you to let yourself be cared for.”

That honeyed voice saying those intimate words sends something warm traveling through him. For once, he fights against his instincts and lets Hannibal guide him to lie on his side.

“Sleep, Will.” Hannibal smiles. “I will take care of everything.”

Will obeys, closing his eyes to the sensation of Hannibal’s fingers caressing his arm, there and gone again in an instant.

Will wakes in the middle of the night, confused and feverish as hell. He kicks the blanket off, feeling as if it's constricting his airway but the cold air forces him to pull the blanket back again.

Will whimpers, getting distressed in his disoriented state.

"Will?"

Will blindly reaches for Hannibal. He clutches the other man's arm like a lifeline and whimpers again.

"What's wrong, darling, are you in pain?"

Will swallows and tries to find enough energy to formulate at least a coherent sentence to convey the reason for his distress.

"I— I can't breathe."

He should have worded his sentence a little more carefully because Hannibal is instantly alarmed. Hannibal switches on the lamp and pulls him into a sitting position. He tries to tell Hannibal that he didn't mean it like that but the man is persistent in completing his check-up before asking him to elaborate.

Even half-delirious with sickness, he feels embarrassed when he tells Hannibal what's bothering him. "I'm used to - um - sleeping on my stomach and I can't breathe like that," he

mumbles, face heating at the endearing look the older man is giving him.

"I see. It is a pretty common occurrence, no need to worry about it," Hannibal assures him in a soft voice. "And as for your problem, I have a rather unorthodox solution."

Unorthodox seems to be a recurring theme in his life lately.

Will is sure that either he is dead or well on his way because there is no way in hell that Hannibal is sliding onto the bed and pulling Will against his chest.

The older man slips his one arm around Will's chest and turns Will slightly on his side until he is lying on his stomach with Hannibal's arm keeping his chest aloft, enough so that he doesn't feel any pressure on his chest.

Technically speaking, the way Hannibal is laying on top of him should be more constricting than before, but all Will feels is safe and sheltered.

Will doesn't remember falling asleep, but when he wakes up, he is cocooned in a ball of warmth. It takes him a moment to recognize the arms underneath him as belonging to Hannibal. God, what was he thinking, cuddling his psychiatrist? Although to be fair, it seems more like Hannibal is the one cuddling him.

He sits up, pulling away from Hannibal and doing his best not to blush. He's sweaty, but it's nowhere near as bad as it gets most nights. He doesn't even think he had a nightmare, which is almost unheard of for him. There is a hint of sunlight coming from under the curtains and he blinks, realizing that it's most likely late afternoon. He'd barely stayed awake long enough for breakfast, after all.

"Your fever has gone down considerably," Hannibal says, looking up at Will with a small, gentle smile on his usually impassive face. "How are you feeling?"

"Like something died in my mouth," Will croaks.

Despite the foul taste in his mouth and the sluggishness from too much sleep, he feels... better. His coughs are mostly gone, though his throat still feels itchy. His fever seems to be manageable, now that he's gotten some medication and rest courtesy of Hannibal.

Glancing at the older man, he registers Hannibal's amused smile.

"I feel better. Thank you," he says, letting sincerity bleed into his words.

"Yes, you seem much better," Hannibal agrees, his eyes roaming across Will's body.

Belatedly, Will realizes that he had put on his customary sleepwear; his usual combination of a shirt and a boxer. Well. It's too late to be embarrassed over that now, especially since he was just cuddling his not-psychiatrist. What even is his life at this point?

Before he can answer, he hears the telltale sounds of his pack growing restless as they realize that Will is awake. Buster is the first to approach the bed, whining at Will with pleading eyes.

Will chuckles. “Hey, buddy, did you guys miss me?” He sighs and makes a move to get out of bed. “I should get up. My dogs—“

“Will be taken care of,” Hannibal says, rising from the bed smoothly as he sees to them.

Fondness overtakes him when he sees the way Hannibal handles his pack. They seem quite taken with the older man as well, most of them following Hannibal as they are led out of the house. Will watches from the windows for several minutes before he decides to take a much-needed bath.

He’s not surprised to find Hannibal in his kitchen again. Hannibal smiles at him before he returns to his task.

Will leans against the doorframe and watches him for a while. Clearing his throat, he finally asks, “Why are you doing this?”

Now that the haze has cleared somewhat, he’s curious. The two of them had been growing close even before this, but this... this is another level of intimacy he hadn’t expected from Hannibal.

Hannibal’s eyes flick over to him. “Because I found myself wanting to take care of you.” Turning the stove off, Hannibal turns to him. “And you had let me. When was the last time someone has cared for you, Will?”

Will opens his mouth, then closes it again. Can it be that simple? He can’t remember ever being taken care of like this, not even when he was a kid. “Thank you,” he says after a moment, not answering the question.

“It was my pleasure,” Hannibal replies, and Will is only slightly surprised to realize that he means it. “Are you hungry?”

“I could eat,” Will admits. Now that the rolling nausea is gone, he’s starving.

Hannibal smiles. “I made tomato soup. Would you like to eat at the table or would you rather go back to the bed?”

Will blinks. “Uh, the table’s fine.” He’s pretty sure the table had been covered in papers the last time he’d looked at it, but it’s clear now. He must have slept through Hannibal cleaning again, just as he’d slept through Alana taking and then bringing back the dogs.

“Excellent,” Hannibal says, ladling them each a bowl. “It’s nothing fancy, but I believe that simpler fare will be best until we get your stomach used to food again.” He carries both bowls over to the table and pulls out a chair for Will, who sits in it bemusedly.

He’s about to take his first spoonful of the soup, Hannibal sitting across from him at the small table, when he remembers something.

What's wrong, darling, are you in pain?

Sweet dreams, darling boy.

“...Hannibal,” he begins slowly. He can’t be remembering that correctly, can he? But that doesn’t seem like the kind of detail his subconscious would make up. “You said something, last night…”

He’s sure he’s not imagining things when he sees how Hannibal’s body turns rigid, though the older man recovers in the next moment.

Will closes his mouth. Does he dare to bring this up now after his deflection earlier?

But there’s no better time to ask than the present. It feels as if they’ve been suspended in time these last two days. The brush of Hannibal’s hand against his skin, the warmth they shared in bed, the way Hannibal did everything to ensure he’s left with no other worry than to get better...these are the things that he wouldn’t dare ask about later once they return to reality.

It’s now or never, while they’re still ensconced in this little bubble, this liminal space of theirs.

Instead of repeating Hannibal’s words, he merely asks, “Did you mean it?”

Of course, Hannibal is not going to let him off so easily. “Did I mean what, Will?”

Will’s ears burn and he looks down at his soup. “The... those endearments,” he blurts out. “That’s...not something you say to a friend.”

“In what circumstances do you think I would use it?”

Will huffs in frustration. “I don’t know, but I don’t want to make an ass of myself by assuming that you...”

He could feel Hannibal’s gaze burning into him as his words trail off, unsure of how to finish that statement himself.

“That I care for you?”

Will sighs and nods. He leans back into the chair then, forcing himself to meet Hannibal’s eyes. “Yes. That.”

“I was under the impression that you wouldn’t remember,” Hannibal says, his tone almost sheepish. “But rest assured that my words are genuine.”

“Oh. Okay.” He winces at his lackluster reply. He couldn’t think of anything better in answer to that revelation. He hasn’t even had coffee yet.

“Does it displease you?”

Will frowns. “You mean...does your care displease me?”

“Yes.”

Will licks his lips, pondering. He doesn’t miss how Hannibal tracks the movement. “No.”

Sharing a smile, they eat their meal in silence. Will savors the taste of the soup and the warm press of Hannibal's leg against his under the kitchen table.

He's not quite sure what to do with the realization that his psychiatrist/ coworker/ friend has a crush on him (*cares for him,* he corrects, *which might not necessarily mean…*) but he wasn't lying when he said he didn't mind. In fact, he muses, a warm feeling in his chest as he feels Hannibal's eyes on him throughout the meal, he rather likes it.

Yes, he could get used to this. Will isn't sure where things will go from here, whether they'll still have this easy peace once they're back in the real world again and not sequestered in his house, but for now, he is content. And judging by the warmth in Hannibal's gaze, he thinks Hannibal feels the same way.

End Notes

This fic is a collaborative effort from a "Round Robin" writing game in the ACOC discord server, where writers participate to write several sentences before the next writer takes up the hot potato :D We're currently writing the next series in this fic, so please subscribe for more updates <3

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